Meng Hardy

EDU 402

9/16/2013

Background Statement

I was born and raised in Beijing, China until I moved to Maine in 2002. Being in one of the biggest and most populated countries in the world meant that fierce competition for schools and job opportunities was guaranteed. Kids officially started school when they were six years old as first graders. However, since almost all families consisted of both working parents, kids my generation were in daycare or relatives’ homes since they were very little. I went to the day care when I was eleven months old, and stayed there until I entered first grade.

In China, the elementary schools were from grade one to grade six. We used “extensive” looping comparing to what the U.S. schools do. For the first four years of my school career, I was in a class with another forty students or so. We had one teacher called the monitor of the class who was in charge of all core subjects, Chinese, Math, English, Science, and Social Studies. We had our own classroom where we stayed for all subjects expect music and gym class. When it was time for us to become fifth graders, our teacher got another batch of first graders and she started the four-year cycle all over again. By the time we entered fifth grade, we got two new teachers. They each taught either Chinese or Math. The Chinese teacher was the monitor of our class. We then had more new teachers in charge of other core subjects. It was believed that one teacher was capable of teaching all subjects for the first four years of school, but the depth of each subject for the last two years of elementary school required more attention from teachers.

In junior high, grade seven to nine, we did looping and tracking. Placement tests were used to either rank us among the peers in our grade or find out our strongest subject. We were placed in classes based on test scores, and remain in the class with the same peers for three years.

In high school, grade ten to twelve, we did the placement tests and tracking for the first year. At the end of the first year, everyone could choose to focus on either science or liberal arts for the remaining two years in high school. We had eight classes consisting of about fifty students each. Since there were always less liberal arts students, one of the eight classes was dispersed and all those students were shuffled into the other seven classes. This left one classroom empty for all liberal art students from all eight classes to form a new class. When we were in eighth grade, all students had the same curriculum, except that liberal art students did not get the expert teachers in Chemistry and Physics, which were the two core courses for science students. We also did not quite go into as much depth as the science students on those subjects. The same case was true for the science students and their history, economics and philosophy classes. Everyone was supposed to take a statewide test on all core subjects by the end of their eleventh grade. We cramped three years’ worth of materials for all subject into two years, so we could be ready for those tests. After the tests, liberal art students didn’t have to take any more science classes, and vice versa. For the last year of our high school career, it was an intensive testing and review session for all the materials we covered the previous two years in high school.

All the kids in my schools were Chinese, so there was no real diversity in ethnicity. Everyone’s parents both worked to support the family, but there was a difference between working class and middle class. We were required to wear uniforms, so the kids who had the resources would compete with one another on sneakers, portable CD players, backpacks, bikes, etc. For all my years in school when I was in China, all classrooms were setup the same way. There would be rows of desks and chairs while the teacher had a desk and podium in front of the room. The teacher used a blackboard and later on maybe an old fashioned projector. All classes were taught the same, from textbooks to lectures. There was no creativity or wiggle room. Teachers did not try any other teaching strategies. Everyone was measured by the same standard in the form of homework, questions, quizzes and tests. For some reason, the rigid teaching method and assessment suited me well. I did develop a learning habit of previewing the textbook, taking notes in class, doing homework, asking questions, and reviewing before quizzes and tests. I handled standardized tests well, because I did not stress myself out when taking tests. My favorite memory was when I was in fifth grade, we were learning solving equations with one variable. My teacher asked me to write the steps and answer on the board. The satisfaction I had knowing that I was answering the questions right in front of my peers was empowering. I still credit that event as my turning point of believing that I was good at math.

Kids in China, at least in Beijing, where the law is easier reinforced, were expected to go from elementary school to high school for free as a commitment the government holds for the next generation. My parents believed that I was capable or smart enough to achieve whatever other people could as long as I put my effort in. They were both working class people who only graduated from high school due to the Cultural Revolution. They wanted me to go to a reputable college. The business world sees education as a process of producing the next generation of capable employees. As the only child, I wanted to please my parents and I placed fairly high in my class because of my learning habits and competitiveness. I knew that I wanted to be a good student because I took pride in hard work and the rewarding high score on tests.

At the end of high school, there was the National College Entrance Exam, known as “GaoKao.” It seemed to us, high-schoolers, that the exam determined the rest of our lives, and everything we went through since first grade was building up for the exam. Everyone was stressed out including the students, teachers, parents, families, administration, and school districts.

Looking back at my education now, I could say that I learned a lot of content, the textbook style. I could still remember or use those facts and skills that I acquired through the twelve years, because the textbook style suited me or I adapted to it. Also, it was the only teaching method in China. There was no other way. However, I do regret that there were no creative outlets or methods in the teaching and learning. Worst of all, I could only imagine what some other failing students might be going through because the textbook-lecture-test combination was not matching their learning needs.

I chose teaching as my profession because I value education and the future generation. I chose to teach math because I enjoy and love math. I would love to share my passion and understanding for math with my students. Most of my experiences as a student in China would not be repeated in my class for my students. However, I do value concrete learning habits, and I think it could be very helpful as the students become more independent. Also, since we were forced to learn three years’ worth of material in two years, I believe that all students can achieve success when they are being challenged and supported.

A superior teacher is capable, understanding, caring, challenging and creative. As a math teacher, I will keep my math skills sharp by utilizing online courses, professional conferences, and recreational math puzzles. I appreciate the attributes each individual student brings to class; those traits make each of them unique. My classroom setup, lesson planning, and assessment should reflect the traits of students. I will utilize technology to engage and stimulate students so they can see math in real-life applicable ways and through various perspectives.

Multiplication tables or the Pythagorean Theorem might be important, but it is the critical thinking, problem solving skills and the sheer joy of solving a puzzle that I want the students to relish and take away from their math class and use it in their lives. I do not want to just teach the students math facts, theorems, and procedures. It is the growth mindset I wish the students to obtain through making mistakes and tackling challenges. I do not want to crush the students’ self-esteem with timed tests. I wish them to gain their skills and material through project-based learning and show their understanding in creative ways. However, I want my students have the confidence they need if they ever have to take a standardized test, because they have acquired all the skills and knowledge in my class.

I hope to bring a different perspective to the transition to Common Core Standards, Mass Customized Learning, and Authentic Curriculum. I have no set-up methods for teaching as a novice; hence I dare to try the more promising methods with my students.

I do have some concerns regarding teaching. There are mixed reviews about Common Core Standards, and who am I to know that this change is for the better? I have to believe in the Standards to be able to carry out the lesson plans fully to meet the standards. Assuming that Singapore has the best Math and Science scores in the world, why can’t we, the U.S. education system, adopt the Singapore methods? Also, I am concerned about the teacher evaluation based on the students’ performance.